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The State of Anthropology in Bhutan

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Abstract

The title belies the contents of this paper, which is a narrative of the transformation of the Bhutanese scholarship from Buddhist to secular matters, from religious to modern authors, and from classical Tibetan to English medium. The paper looks at the traditional Bhutanese scholarship—monastic education—which was dominated by lamas and monks, pursued only Buddhist themes, and wrote in the classical Tibetan; the western-style education system with English as the medium was introduced in the late 1950s parallel to the traditional education system; and the modern education system which is still biased towards studying science subjects, and hence the absence of anthropological study of and in Bhutan. The paper ends with discussions on potential areas of future anthropological research areas and challenges of doing fieldwork in Bhutan.

1. Introduction

If there is such a thing called ‘Bhutanese Anthropology’—whether it is the anthropological study of Bhutanese society and culture, or an anthropology course in Bhutan’s education system—we do not currently have one in Bhutan.

Until recent years the anthropological study of Bhutanese culture and society have been confined to the study of some of the minority ethnic groups such as *Brokpas*, *Lhops*, and *Monpas* by both Bhutanese and foreigner scholars, most of which were written to fulfil academic requirements in the universities. In 2009 Sherubtse College—the country’s premier institute, which offers undergraduate courses in humanities, social and natural sciences—under Royal University of Bhutan (RUB), started an undergraduate course in sociology in which anthropology is taught as a module. Royal Thimphu College (RTC) replicated the same course in 2010. If the Bhutanese education planners had exercised their foresights, anthropology, not sociology, should have been a more useful course to study Bhutan, a nation of villages and farmers.

In 1989, United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) commissioned Professor Fredrick Barth and Professor Unni Wikan, both Norwegian anthropologists, to study the situation of children in Bhutan, and the report, *Bhutan Report: Results of Fact Finding Mission* was submitted in

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1990. In its effort to promote Bhutan studies and disseminate documents on Bhutan, Center for Bhutan Studies (CBS) published their report under a new title, *Situation of Children in Bhutan: An Anthropological Perspective* in 2011 as a monograph. It is the first work on Bhutan by trained and renowned anthropologists, and among others, they wrote on Bhutan's culture variations, a schematic overviews of the environment and the world of Bhutanese children, social organizations, cosmology, the persons, illness, and the life cycles from conception, birth, infants and children, courtship and marriage, old age to death [Barth and Wikan 2011]. The reprinting of this report reveals a dearth of anthropological works and literature on Bhutan.

If anthropology is the study of human culture and the hallmark of Bhutan's nationhood is founded on the national goal of preserving and promoting its unique cultural identity, how paradoxical it is that the anthropology is neither taught in the Bhutanese colleges nor is there a formal anthropological study of Bhutan. However, this partly mirrors the plight of anthropology as an academic discipline everywhere—that anthropology is peripheral to other social sciences and humanities subjects. When some Himalayan regions like Dolpo, Mustang, Solo-Khumbu in Nepal, and Ladakh, Sikkim and Arunachal Pradesh in India have received much attention from the western academics, and began to be studied as a proxy for Tibet after the integration of Tibet to China in 1959, neither the Bhutanese themselves nor the western anthropologists have worked on Bhutan and in Bhutan. The country remains the least anthropologically studied belt in the entire Himalayan areas which are influenced by the Tibetan Buddhism and cultures.

2. Traditional Bhutanese Scholarship

It may be helpful to first understand the traditional Bhutanese education system to contextualize the beginning of modern scholarship in Bhutan. During the ecclesiocratic period (1651-1907), the temples of learning were state and private monastic institutions, which unluckily were accessible to only a few privileged male children. The scholarship was an exclusive domain of Buddhist lamas and monks, and Buddhism the only proper subject of academic and spiritual pursuit. The monks exclusively studied religious subjects, and any scholarship on secular or worldly matters, particularly those associated with the ordinary people that did not contribute to the knowledge of Buddhism or the goal of enlightenment, were systematically neglected. The voices of the common people which did not conform to Buddhist values were actively discouraged. In the narratives of the state, the term 'folk' or secular (*jig tenpa* or *mi nagpo*) is always differentiated from the religious (*damcho*). In other words, there was a clear sacred-profane distinction. According to Aris [1987], the monastic culture enjoyed an exclusive monopoly over the arts, education and government, and shaped popular

attitudes and values of the lay community, and the voices of the common people heard in some of the popular folktales, folksongs, sayings, beliefs, and superstitions are remnants of those which escaped the state censure. There was a tension between state power informed by Buddhist values on the one hand, and common people's values based on the individual, the family and the wider lay community on the other. In such a situation, the common people relied on a rich Bhutanese oral tradition to educate their children.

Traditional Bhutanese scholars made a huge contribution to the scholarship in the form of *namthar*, a hagiographical genre, which literally means 'liberating through hearing.' The main end of this corpus of writing is spiritual, not secular. However, many non-spiritual matters can be culled from these writings to construct the past and understand socio-political and religious milieu during which they were written. Traditional Bhutanese scholarship was known for historical works in the Himalayas, for they covered not only Bhutan but other Himalayan regions influenced by the Tibetan culture. Most of the *namthar* are mostly of the Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal (1594-1651) and his successive body, speech and mind reincarnations; Je Khenpo, the heads of the Drukpa Kagyu School of Tibetan Buddhism; and Desis, the secular rulers [Pommaret 2002]. Authors themselves were religious figures and they wrote in the classical Tibetan. It was improper, unthinkable, or blasphemous to write about lay people or non-Buddhist themes. This large body of literature today serve as the primary source of information for writing about Bhutan's history, culture, politics, society, etc.

3. British Writings

It was the non-Bhutanese writers who first wrote about the themes that were considered unimportant by Bhutanese traditional scholars. The letters and accounts of the Portuguese Jesuits Fathers Stephen Cacella and John Cabral, the first Europeans to visit Bhutan, who briefly stayed in Bhutan in 1627 on their journey to Tibet, for example, provide rich information about Bhutan and its founder, Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal [see Baillie 1999]. But the main early sources for non-religious matters are the accounts written by the British missions between 1774 and 1910. The British Empire in India sent several political missions to Bhutan, initially to open trade routes to Tibet via Bhutan—George Bogle and Alexander Hamilton, 1774-1777; Samuel Turner, 1783—and later for political reasons—Kishen Kant Bose, 1815; R. Boileau Pemberton, 1838; Ashley Eden, 1863; J. C. White, 1910. In absence of any records by Bhutanese themselves, these accounts are the only sources of writings on Bhutan, especially after the first contact with the British India in the south beginning 1770s (references to the British records can be found at [Dorji Penjore 2004]).

4. Expatriate Writings

The next phase of writings was also by expatriates, mostly Indians, who had lived, worked, or visited Bhutan after Bhutan was opened to the outside world beginning in the 1960s. The expatriates worked in Bhutan in different roles to fill a crucial human resource shortage in implementing a series of five-year plan socio-economic development beginning from the first plan (1961-1966). Their writings in English on Bhutan's society, politics, culture, folklore, festivals, environment, and other aspects are being continued right to the present day. As an unexplored nation newly opened to the outside world Bhutan became writers' paradise.

In addition to the Indian expatriates, Bhutan attracted many travellers from around the world, especially from Europe, who wrote on Bhutan in English and other European languages. Some of them were trained Tibetologists and authored authoritative works on Bhutan using primary information.

5. Modern Bhutanese Scholarship

According to Karma Ura [2010], the first school was established in Bumthang in Bhutan with 14 Bhutanese boys, following the visit of the first king Ugyen Wangchuck to Kolkatta, India, in 1911 to attend the Coronation Durbar of King George V (1865-1936). In 1914 the king sent 45 boys to the Dr Graham's Home School in Kalimpong. Another school was established in Haa in western Bhutan to teach in English and Hindi that same year. In 1915, another school was established in Bumthang with 14 students. The first batch of students became important officials in 1930s and 1940s [Karma Ura 2010]. The government developed a formal national education system in 1955, and in 1959 it was decided to provide free universal modern education. In 1959 only 72 Bhutanese were English literate. Sherubtse College, established in 1968, later began to offer three-year undergraduate courses and it later became a premier institute in Bhutan. It was only in the late 1980s that the Bhutanese started to write on secular themes using western methodologies, narratives and in English. The writing of history became quite popular. Most of the writers had religious background, notably Lam Sanga (lineage, [1983]); Lopen Nado (history, [1986]); and Pema Tshewang (history, [1994]). The religious figure like Geden Rinchen also began to write on history [1972]. It was a beginning of religious figure writing on secular matter in the classical Tibetan as well as Dzongkha, the national language, and the lay writers—the product of the western education—writing on quasi-religious themes in English. In 1995 Karma Ura wrote the first book length novel on Bhutan's social, political and economic lives and institutions, which existed during the reigns of the second (reign: 1926-

1952) and the third king (reign: 1952-1972). Titled *The Hero with a Thousand Eyes: A Historical Novella*, Karma Ura drew on the life history of an officer who served both the first and second kings in various positions and roles. *Of Rainbows and Clouds: The Life of Yab Ugyen Dorji as Told to His Daughter* soon followed it in 1999. The life history account narrated by Ugyen Dorji to his daughter, the Queen of Bhutan Ashi Dorji Wangmo Wangchuck, forms the basis of the book.

However, it was in the Bhutanese oral tradition that writings by Bhutanese on Bhutan in English flourished. Unlike in other countries, it was a woman not man who pioneered the compilation of the Bhutanese folktales and made them accessible to students and English audience. *Folktales of Bhutan* (1993) was followed four years later by *Bhutanese Tales of the Yeti* (1997). Kinley Wangmo published *Tales from Rural Bhutan* in 1998. Other publications on Bhutanese folktales are *Ap Wang Dugay: A Bhutanese Folk Hero* (1995) by John Michael Chiramal; *Folktales of Bhutan* (1998) by Rita Thomas; *Talisman of Good Fortune and other Stories from Rural Bhutan* (2002) by Rinzin Rinzin; *Heard from Grandparents* (2002) by Drugyal HSS Literary Club; *Bhutanese Folktales from the South and the East* (2004) by Gopilal Acharya; *Was it a Yeti or a Deity? A collection of folktales from Kheng* (2006) by Dorji Penjore; *The Cuckoo and the Pigeon: A Collection of Folktales from Rural Bhutan* (2008) by Ngawang Phuntsho; and *Dangphu Dingphu: A Collection of Bhutanese Folktales* (2011) by Dorji Penjore.

Karma Ura published *The Ballad of Pemi Tshewang Tashi: Wind Borne Feather* in 1996: the English rendering of a popular ballad known as *loze* (once taught in the college as a textbook) of a chamberlain who was sent against his wish to fight and who died fighting for his lord in the 1880s. *Gaylong Sumdar Tashi: Songs of Sorrow* (1998) by Sonam Kinga is a similar translation of the narrative account of a Bhutanese monk caught between his love and family on the one hand and his duty as a monk on the other. C.T. Dorji has written a dozen books on various aspects of Bhutan, from Buddhism, history, and poetry to topics such as public transport.

6. Anthropology in Bhutan

Ever since the introduction of a western-style English medium education system in Bhutan in the 1950s, the education policy was heavily biased towards training engineers and doctors at the expense of social scientists and artists. The country was then facing a manpower shortage of all trainings and levels. After physical science, the natural choice of students, parents and teachers was social science, accounting, and economics in particular. English literature is the only humanities subject taught in the college and it received the last preference. Irrespective of their academic inclination and ambition, bright students were compelled to study science subjects because of a systemic structural

bias that rewarded science students. Students who opted for science subjects studied abroad, mostly in India, while those opting social science and humanities subjects had to be content with studying in Bhutan. Sadly, the country is yet to come out of this systemic bias. Today, both the government and bilateral and multilateral development partners provide scholarships to study science and engineering. It was during the last few years that civil servants working in research and academic institutes like Center for Bhutan Studies and Royal University of Bhutan had chosen to study anthropology and sociology for their graduate study. This is indeed the beginning of a Bhutanese anthropology.

Thus far only five full ethnographic works have been published: Jagar Dorji's *Lhop: A Tribal Community in South Western Bhutan, and its Survival Through Time* (2003); B. Deben Sharma's *Lhops (Doya) of Bhutan: An Ethnographic Account* (2005); Sita Giri's *The Vital Link: Monpas and Their Forests* (2004); Raghubir Chand's *Brokpas: The Hidden Highlanders of Bhutan* (2004); and *Love, Courtship and Marriage in Rural Bhutan: A Preliminary Ethnography of Wamling Village in Zhemgang* (2009) by Dorji Penjore. The later is a home ethnography, with a particular focus on a traditional courtship custom, whose variants are widely practiced in eastern and central Bhutan.

Some of the unique Bhutanese culture and customs have received more attention from the Bhutanese writers such as the marriage customs: Sonam Wangmo's 'The Brokpas: A Semi-nomadic People in Eastern Bhutan' (1990); Tenzin Dorji's 'Marriage Customs and Practices of the Me rag Sag steng Nomads ('brog pa) of bkra shis sgang, Eastern Bhutan' (2002); Lham Dorji's *Sergamathang Kothkin and other Bhutanese Marriage Customs* (2004). The last one presents the Brokpas's *chung nyen*, a complex childhood engagement ritual, involving a matchmaker and gift exchange. It also covered *serga mathang* (golden cross-cousin) marriage in Mongar district in eastern Bhutan, and *ngenzhung* marriage in the lower Kheng (central Bhutan). The latter is the only marriage practice in Bhutan in which a husband has to offer three years of labour as bride service before he can marry and take his wife permanently to his house. Ugyen Pelgen and Tenzin Rigden wrote *Khengrig Namsum: A Historical Profile of Zhemgang Dzongkhag* in 1999. The list ends here.

7. Future of Anthropological Research in Bhutan

This lack of anthropological research in and of Bhutan is indeed a blessing in disguise, for it provides an opportunity rarely found in other countries to do original research, and for the Bhutanese anthropologists to study about their own country and address some of the issues facing anthropology such as the problems of representation and relevance. Center for Bhutan Studies has been established in 1999 to slowly become a premier social science institute in the country. It started social science or anthropological study by studying non-Buddhist festivals which most villages across eastern and

central Bhutan celebrate every year. It also began the publication of the bi-annual *Journal of Bhutan Studies* where papers related to Bhutanese studies are published. It also started two publications (monograph and occasional publication series) on social, religious, cultural, historical, political, and economic aspects of Bhutan. National Library and Archives of Bhutan (NLAB) and National Museum of Bhutan (NMB) have also been promoting the Bhutanese study and have made significant contributions to the Bhutanese studies.

Today Bhutan is a nation going through a dramatic transition. There is a tremendous scope for doing traditional ethnographic fieldwork and researching on religion, rituals, social organizations, family, kinship, etc., as well as the modern and post-modern themes: of the Bhutanese who are caught in the dramatic social and political transformation; youth, the social and culture impacts of TV and mass media; migration; tourism. Two national surveys on Gross National Happiness have yielded minefields of information on the country's ethnicity, languages and dialects, traditional community institutions and structures, culture, traditions and belief systems [CBS 2009].

But there are challenges as well, a bureaucratic procedure to begin with. Presently there is no system in place that will allow foreign scholars to conduct an independent or joint research in Bhutan. The government has been employing consultants, and relevant government ministries or departments have been handling these experts. The nature of study is technical and not social, cultural or in-depth study of the contexts. Center for Bhutan Studies started to accept a few foreign scholars, both professors and students, under its internship programme to do fieldwork-based research in Bhutan. But the programme could not be sustained due to the floodgate of applications and incapacity of Center to handle the demand and provide effective research counterparts. Royal University of Bhutan and a few other institutes like National Museum of Bhutan and National Library and Archives of Bhutan have also begun similar programmes, but these institutes too were similarly handicapped. There is no clear government policy on accepting foreign scholars to do a long-term fieldwork—something that is necessary or mandatory for anthropology—in Bhutan.

The second challenge is the government's conservative tourism policy because of its concern for environment and culture. A minimum tourist tariff is of USD 200 every day (the amount covers one's local lodge, food and transport) is presumably one of the highest in the world. Because of this strict tourism policy, there is a notion to 'eroticize' Bhutan and to assume that the tariff is prohibitively expensive. It is also possible to conduct research in Bhutan without paying daily tariff if mutually beneficial research projects are agreed with counterparts in Bhutan. One main challenge is the language. One needs to identify and decide where research or fieldwork is going to take place. Linguistically Bhutan is not as homogeneous as it seems with about 18 local languages and dialects,

including the national language, Dzongkha and Nepali language, spoken across the country, when Malinowskian anthropologists are required to learn the native language. For that matter, mastery of local language is not an option for in-depth study. Worst, most of these dialects are not intelligible to each other. Although Dzongkha is widely spoken and understood, common people's knowledge of Dzongkha is too poor to yield necessary research information, some of which may be technical. In some areas, the language spoken in one village is different from the next village, only half an hour on foot. Because most people in Thimphu and Paro, the first contact points for foreigners, speak English, visitors find it difficult to learn local languages. Even without a tourist tariff, fieldwork in Bhutan has been found to be difficult and expensive. The population is scattered over far-flung villages separated by high mountains and rivers.

8. Conclusion

The history of modern Bhutanese scholarship is only about thirty years old. The Bhutanese who went to modern English medium schools first began to write only in the 1980s. During the last few years, there has been a flowering of Bhutanese writing in English and Dzongkha, while traditional scholarship is almost dead. Increasing number of Bhutanese is embracing writing as a vocation. Center for Bhutan Studies has issued ISBN for 1,128 books since 2007. Center for Bhutan Studies also published, both in print and on line, about 70 books since 1999. Earlier, the Bhutanese writers wrote for schools, now they have started to write for the reading public. Bhutan's literacy rate has been improving, and with it there is a corresponding increase of the Bhutanese reading public.

As a direct consequence of globalization, Bhutanese are beginning to realise that their unique culture will no more be safe, and the best safety is to write and document for posterity. Anthropologists are better placed than the rest to do research on all aspects of Bhutanese culture. Most of the books written by the non-Bhutanese on Bhutan are not good to say the least, and increasing numbers of Bhutanese are placing increasing demand on the Bhutanese writers to rewrite and represent them correctly. For foreign researchers, the challenges of doing research in Bhutan are many, but so are the rewards.

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